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MILITARY READINESS

Improvements Still Needed in Assessing Military Readiness

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Today's American military forces have earned the reputation of being among the best, if not the best, trained forces in the world. That reputation stands in stark contrast to the so-called "hollow forces" of the 1970s. Yet, as we have proceeded through nearly a decade of military downsizing, periodic concerns or questions have surfaced about the potential for a new "hollowing" of our forces. Concerns voiced by military personnel to congressional staff during field visits are quite different from official unit readiness assessment reports forwarded through service headquarters to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and to the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). This difference has resulted in questions in recent years about the true measure of readiness of our military forces.

Today, I would like to provide a broad overview of the readiness assessment process and frame my comments around three questions.

- What disconnects are associated with readiness reporting, and why do they exist?
- What corrective actions have been proposed and taken to measure readiness?
- What further actions are needed?

Background

Historically, readiness of U.S. military forces at the unit level has been measured using the Status of Resources and Training System (SORTS), under the sponsorship of the JCS. Under SORTS, units report their overall readiness status as well as the status of four resource areas (personnel, equipment and supplies on hand, equipment condition, and training). The readiness status of a unit is reported by assigning capability, or "C," ratings as follows:

C-1—Unit can undertake the full wartime missions for which it is organized or designed.

C-2—Unit can undertake the bulk of its wartime missions.

C-3—Unit can undertake major portions of its wartime missions.

C-4—Unit requires additional resources and/or training to undertake its wartime missions, but if the situation dictates, it may be required to undertake portions of the missions with resources on hand.

C-5—Unit is undergoing a service-directed resource change and is not prepared to undertake its wartime missions.

While SORTS still provides the basic underpinning to readiness assessments, both OSD and JCS have established senior oversight groups in recent years to focus on readiness issues at a higher level and provide a more comprehensive assessment of readiness.

Summary

Formal readiness reports provided by SORTS have sometimes indicated a higher state of readiness than appears warranted based on other information coming from military personnel in the field. The implications are that the formal reporting system is overly optimistic in its readiness assessments, and questions can be legitimately raised about its credibility. As we and others have reported, there are many shortcomings in SORTS that need to be addressed, including the

- lack of emphasis on readiness on a long-term basis, contrasted with the snapshot in time currently provided;
- use of insufficient indicators to ensure a comprehensive assessment of readiness; and
- inability to measure integrated readiness of joint operating forces.

Our recommendations have been targeted toward helping DOD identify indicators most relevant to developing a more comprehensive readiness assessment and ensuring that comparable data are maintained by all services to allow the development of trends on the selected indicators.

What Disconnects Are Associated With Readiness Reporting, and Why Do They Exist?

Several types of disconnects have historically existed between SORTS formal readiness reports and other information obtained from military personnel in the field, and those disconnects exist for various reasons. In recent years, either in reports or testimony before the Congress, we discussed the Department of Defense's (DOD) system for measuring readiness and reported on the need for improvements.¹ We previously reported instances where, during fieldwork on our assignments, SORTS data appeared to paint a rosier picture of readiness than did various military officials, who expressed concerns about readiness in their discussions with us, or even in correspondence with higher headquarters. These concerns were centered on high operating tempo (OPTEMPO), frequent deployments of personnel away from home (known as PERSTEMPO),

¹A list of relevant GAO reports and testimonies is included at the end of this statement.

personnel shortfalls and turnovers, and the shifting of funds from key readiness accounts to meet other needs, each of which could degrade readiness. Many of these concerns addressed current conditions and, more importantly, the future if existing conditions persisted.

We have continued to report on these issues in conjunction with more recent work. Our April 1996 report on PERSTEMPO issues noted that DOD could not precisely measure the increase in deployments because until 1994 only the Navy had systems to track PERSTEMPO. Still missing were clear and consistent definitions and data collection on a consistent basis across the services. Further, during our visits to high-deploying units, military personnel at major commands expressed grave concerns about the adverse effects on readiness resulting from high operating tempo and frequent deployments away from home. However, SORTS C-ratings examined in conjunction with these assignments have continued to show a fairly stable level of overall unit readiness. Less than one-third of the high-deploying units we reviewed dropped below planned readiness levels due to deployments. During our most recent examination of this issue in conjunction with Special Operations Forces, we found that a negative impact on readiness due to increased OPTEMPO was not readily apparent in the SORTS reports.

In 1995 we reported that participation in peace operations could enhance or reduce a unit's combat capability, depending on the type of unit, skills used or not used, length of participation, and in-theater training opportunities. We noted that the ground combat forces, mechanized infantry, armored units, and units that are heavily dependent on equipment (such as artillery) face the greatest combat skill erosion when they deploy for peace operations without their equipment. Also, while they are deployed, they may do tasks that are significantly different from the combat tasks for which they normally train.

Senior defense officials have stated that it is difficult to estimate the amount of time required to restore a unit's combat effectiveness for all its missions after a unit participates in a peace operation; however, Army commanders generally estimate a range of 3 to 6 months. Yet when examining SORTS reports, we have seen little to indicate significant reductions in C-ratings for units participating in peacekeeping operations. While I cannot say conclusively that downgraded readiness should have been reported, I will note that a special study entitled The Effects of Peace Operations on Unit Readiness, published in February 1996 by the Army's Center for Army Lessons Learned, recommended that the Department of

the Army consider having units report “C-5” on their unit status reports for a period of 4 months after return from peace operations.

Our 1996 report on chemical and biological defense pointed out that many of the types of problems encountered during the Gulf War remain uncorrected, and U.S. forces continue to experience serious training-related weaknesses in their chemical and biological proficiency. At the same time, we found that the effectiveness of SORTS for evaluating units’ chemical and biological readiness was limited. This was the case despite a DOD requirement imposed in 1993 for all the services to assess their equipment and training status for operations in a contaminated environment and to report this data as a distinct part of SORTS. DOD’s requirement also allows commanders to subjectively upgrade their overall SORTS status, regardless of their chemical and biological status. For example, one early deploying active Army division was rated as C-1—the highest SORTS category—despite rating itself C-4 for chemical and biological equipment readiness.

I also want to touch on the effect that manning levels have on readiness, which we reported on in 1995. This continues to be an important issue. Existing SORTS data often reflects a high readiness level for manning because in the aggregate, through substitution, units may numerically have most of their assigned personnel. However, aggregating data can mask underlying personnel problems that can be detrimental to readiness, such as shortages by skill level and rank or grade. Compounding these problems can be high levels of personnel turnover. When considered collectively, these factors create situations where commanders may have difficulty developing and maintaining unit cohesion and accomplishing training objectives. Judging by our recent review of selected commanders’ comments submitted with their SORTS reports, and other available data, the problems I have just noted are real, although not well reflected in the overall C-ratings.

Several factors play a part in the apparent disconnects I have noted here today. We have noted that formal readiness assessments in SORTS contain both objective and subjective elements. Gunnery scores, for example, can be more objectively measured than can the broad impact of personnel shortfalls and turnovers. The C-rating for training is based on a commander’s subjective assessment of how well a unit is trained based on his personal observation and various internal and external evaluations. A commander may subjectively change his unit’s overall C-rating, based on experience, to reflect a broader perspective of the unit’s ability to perform

its wartime missions. Thus, concerns about degradation in readiness in one area may diminish in relation to the commander's confidence about the overall state of readiness.

It may be that a commander's informal statements of concern over readiness, apart from SORTS, are a signal of an impending change that may eventually show up in SORTS reports. However, we have been told by a variety of military leaders that some commanders may view the SORTS reports they prepare as scorecards on their capabilities and performance with the potential to affect their promotion potential. Thus, they are reluctant to report degraded readiness. We have also been told that the reluctance to cite degraded readiness is indicative of a "can do" spirit of optimism. Whatever the cause, the fact is that significant differences can and do exist between official SORTS reports, other data, and professional military judgments.

What Corrective Actions Have Been Proposed and Taken to Measure Readiness?

In 1994 we reported that C-ratings represent a snapshot in time; they are not predictive and do not address long-term readiness or signal impending changes in the status of resources. Neither do they assess joint readiness, that is, the preparedness of unified commands and joint task forces to effectively integrate individual service combat and support units into a joint operating force.

We identified and reported on a number of indicators that (1) service officials told us were either critical or important to a more comprehensive assessment of readiness and (2) had some predictive value. These indicators included projected personnel trends, crew manning, recruiting shortfalls, personnel stability, PERSTEMPO, borrowed manpower, morale, operating tempo, funding, accidents, and unit readiness and proficiency. At that time we recommended that the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness be directed to

- review the indicators we had identified as being critical to predicting readiness and select the specific indicators most relevant to a more comprehensive readiness assessment,
- develop criteria to evaluate the selected indicators and prescribe how often the indicators should be reported to supplement SORTS data, and
- ensure that comparable data is maintained by all services to allow the development of trends on the selected indicators.

In the 1994 time frame and later, OSD and JCS began a number of initiatives that have heightened the emphasis on readiness within their respective offices, including some initial emphasis on joint readiness. Additionally, some of the services have initiated actions to strengthen their assessments of readiness.

In the fall of 1993, OSD created a Senior Readiness Oversight Council comprised of high-level military and civilian officials and co-chaired by the Deputy Secretary of Defense and the Vice Chairman of JCS. The Council meets monthly to review the status of readiness based on briefings given by each service chief of staff and an overall assessment by the Vice Chairman. Also, results of the JCS joint reviews are briefed to the Council. The Council focuses on topical readiness issues, too, such as various aspects of combat support, both on a short- and long-term basis. The Council is also responsible for providing quarterly readiness reports to the Congress.² The most recent unclassified quarterly readiness report submitted to the Congress for the period October to December 1996 stated that “first to fight” forces were at a high level of readiness, while overall unit readiness was stable at historic levels. At the same time, it noted that careful management was required for some segments of the force that were critical to current operations and to major regional contingencies.

OSD is in the beginning stages of attempting to develop a readiness baseline, which when completed will contain additional indicators with information on personnel, equipment, training, and joint readiness that is not available from existing DOD databases. This baseline is now more oriented to examining functional issues such as accessions, retention, manning levels, and training on an aggregate basis than it is to developing a more comprehensive readiness assessment system from a unit perspective. Over time, as system development continues, the baseline is expected to facilitate assessments of joint readiness, provide a basis for resource allocation, and support DOD’s budgeting process. OSD’s efforts over the past 3 years have focused on identifying indicators that would be useful to this system. OSD officials told us they hope to have baseline data available to assist in joint readiness assessments within 3 or 4 years but that a comprehensive system with predictive capabilities will evolve over several years.

²Section 361 of the 1996 defense authorization act added a new section to chapter 22 of 10 U.S.C., section 452, requiring the Secretary of Defense to submit quarterly reports on military readiness to the Congress.

To direct more attention to readiness, JCS established the Chairman's Readiness System, which became operational in December 1994. A major component of this system is the Joint Monthly Readiness Review process, which provides an assessment of readiness to execute the National Military Strategy through current assessments of unit and joint readiness at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. The process requires each commander in chief (CINCPAC), service, and combat support agency to assess and report on the current and projected readiness status of major combat and critical strategic forces, given specific scenarios. A foundation for these assessments is provided by SORTS, supplemented by other data available to the CINCPACs. JCS staff told us that the joint reviews generally focus on relatively near-term readiness issues (current time to 2 years), often dealing with combat support in such functional areas as lift, intelligence, logistics, and sustainment. These reviews help to identify readiness deficiencies that can be prioritized for possible remedy or workarounds.

Also, JCS is attempting to develop the capability to combine multiple DOD databases to assess readiness at tactical, operational, and strategic levels. In doing so, JCS recognized that the SORTS system is oriented more to assessing readiness at the tactical or unit level. This capability could be used to automate and expedite analyses now completed as part of the JCS joint reviews. A JCS official told us that funding has just been approved to implement this project. It is important to note that as JCS develops the planned software programs, the system would still incorporate SORTS, with its problems, as well as multiple other data systems to provide a broader assessment of readiness issues at multiple levels.

At the service level, only the Army has taken significant actions on its own to identify and collect data to provide a more comprehensive assessment of readiness. The Army Readiness Management System (ARMS), which began during the past year, is a 4-year effort to combine SORTS data with Army installation status reports and the Training and Doctrine Command's training status report to develop a comprehensive assessment of unit, operational, and training readiness.³ The Army's focus in developing ARMS has been on improving or enhancing information provided by SORTS reports. As part of this effort, unit commanders are now required to report data in a number of additional categories. While this supplemental data is not used by reporting units to set C-ratings, the data is used by the Army to

³An installation status report provides an assessment of mission support, strategic mobility, housing, community, utility, and environmental infrastructure assets on an Army installation. The training status report provides an assessment of the Training and Doctrine Command's current and future capability to provide skilled soldiers, training and equipment criteria, and sound doctrine for Army units.

do supplemental analyses and make some projections of future impacts on readiness. For example, data now collected pertains to crew proficiency, the percentage of specialty training completed, and PERSTEMPO. Moreover, the software program used in ARMS allows Army officials at all levels to quickly develop and portray current, historical, trend, and near-term predictive readiness information.

The Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force continue to rely on SORTS to provide readiness information and have not required commanders to provide information on additional indicators since our 1994 report. The Navy has started analyzing existing SORTS data in more finite ways to enhance its usefulness. This effort includes analyses by fleet, type of ship, type of aircraft, and deployed status. Within the next year, Navy officials hope to include information outside of SORTS, for example, maintenance data and equipment cannibalization data, as part of its analyses in an effort to develop some short-term readiness forecast capability. The Marine Corps has continued to collect and report only those indicators required by JCS regulation as a part of SORTS, and officials told us they have no plans to systematically obtain other readiness information.

Air Force officials told us they see no need to use readiness indicators other than those provided by SORTS. Instead, they believe that SORTS reporting needs to be improved, and they are exploring ways to make the SORTS data more sensitive to readiness changes by narrowing the percentage range for reporting at a certain C-rating. However, Air Force officials told us that changes to SORTS reporting would not be proposed for at least a year.

What Further Actions Are Needed?

We continue to have concerns that not enough attention is being devoted to ensuring the accuracy and completeness of SORTS—the beginning point for higher-level assessments at the operational and strategic levels. Continuing shortcomings in SORTS, both in terms of its inherent limitations and seeming disconnects, need to be addressed if DOD is to have a credible foundation upon which a more comprehensive readiness reporting system can be built. In addressing these deficiencies, DOD should develop additional readiness indicators, and ensure that they are integrated into assessments of readiness on a unit-level basis within each of the services.

We commend JCS and OSD efforts to develop broader capabilities for measuring readiness. However, some of those efforts involve making use of existing databases, apart from SORTS, to develop a more comprehensive

assessment of readiness. We believe that efforts will be required to ensure the accuracy and completeness of those databases. For example, while the potential for PERSTEMPO to adversely affect retention raises concerns, OSD's primary database dealing with reasons for separating from military service has historically captured limited information on why separations occur. An OSD official expressed hope that as data systems used in OSD's baseline project come into increased use, senior leaders will exert pressure to enhance the quality of these data systems. We believe that actions to identify database requirements, limitations, and needed improvements should occur concurrent with the baseline development.

This concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions that you or Members of the Subcommittee may have.

Recent GAO Reports and Testimonies Dealing With Readiness

Army Ranger Training: Safety Improvements Need to Be Institutionalized
(GAO/NSIAD-97-29, Jan. 2, 1997).

Military Readiness: Data and Trends for April 1995 to March 1996
(GAO/NSIAD-96-194, Aug. 2, 1996).

Operation and Maintenance Funding: Trends in Army and Air Force Use of Funds for Combat Forces and Infrastructure (GAO/NSIAD-96-141, June 4, 1996).

Chemical and Biological Defense: Emphasis Remains Insufficient to Resolve Continuing Problems (GAO/T-NSIAD-96-154, May 1, 1996).

Civilian Downsizing: Unit Readiness Not Adversely Affected, but Future Reductions a Concern (GAO/NSIAD-96-143BR, Apr. 22, 1996).

Military Readiness: A Clear Policy Is Needed to Guide Management of Frequently Deployed Units (GAO/NSIAD-96-105, Apr. 8, 1996).

Chemical and Biological Defense: Emphasis Remains Insufficient to Resolve Continuing Problems (GAO/NSIAD-96-103, Mar. 29, 1996).

DOD Reserve Components: Issues Pertaining to Readiness
(GAO/T-NSIAD-96-130, Mar. 21, 1996).

Military Readiness: Data and Trends for January 1990 to March 1995
(GAO/NSIAD-96-111BR, Mar. 4, 1996).

Peace Operations: Effect of Training, Equipment, and Other Factors on Unit Capability (GAO/NSIAD-96-14, Oct. 18, 1995).

Military Personnel: High Aggregate Personnel Levels Maintained Throughout Drawdown (GAO/NSIAD-95-97, June 2, 1995).

Military Readiness: Improved Assessment Measures Are Evolving
(GAO/T-NSIAD-95-117, Mar. 16, 1995).

Military Readiness: DOD Needs to Develop a More Comprehensive Measurement System (GAO/NSIAD-95-29, Oct. 27, 1994).

Military Readiness: Current Indicators Need to Be Expanded for a More Comprehensive Assessment (GAO/T-NSIAD-94-160, Apr. 21, 1994).

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